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Report on Israel Ship Attack A Tetchy Task for Pentagon

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Officials at the Pentagon have been struggling for the past week to put together a public report on the circumstances surrounding the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty.

One of their big problems has been to find a way to tell the truth . . . and nothing but the truth without telling the whole truth.

It is now quite well known, but unofficially, that the Liberty was sent in close to the shore of the Sinai Peninsula to see what information could be picked up from the battlefield by the ship's sophisticated electronic snooping gear.

In making their report on the incident, the Pentagon officials would like somehow to emphasize that the ship was attacked without warning while she was in international waters, where she had every right to be, and yet to avoid damaging relations with the Israelis, who immediately apologized for the attack.

They also would like to avoid discussing the importance of the ship's assignment without letting it appear that the Liberty was sent on a fool's mission which led to the needless loss of 31 lives.

It would be hard to underestimate, however, the importance that both the United States and the Soviet Union place on such snooping missions and on their ability to intercept radio and radar signals and be able to jam a potential enemy's communications.

According to Jane's Fighting Ships, the Soviet Union now has 26 trawlers, many of them carrying scientific sounding machines like "Bathograph," "Dolomuter" and "Protector."

They are, according to the standard reference book on naval forces, "reported to be

fitted with electronic interception equipment, with a layout designed for intelligence collection. A considerable number of observation trawlers, equipped with radio aerials and direction-finding apparatus, have been sighted by British and American warships during international combined sea and air exercises."

The previous edition of Jane's published in 1951 listed only one of the direction trawlers, which range up to about 165 feet long, about the size of an ocean-going minesweeper.

Besides the Liberty, which is a converted World War II Victory ship, the United States has one other converted Victory ship, the Belmont, and three converted Liberty ships, the Oxford, Georgetown, and Jamestown, according to Jane's. All have been commissioned within the last six years.

They are described as "mobile bases for research and communication and electromagnetic radiation."

In addition to these very specialized ships, both navies have numerous other vessels with complex electronic gear and they, too, are used for electronic eavesdropping.

The Soviet trawlers have a variety of assignments.

They keep a regular watch of the home bases for the U.S. fleet of Polaris armed nuclear submarines at Rota, Spain; Guam; Holy Loch, Scotland; and Charleston, S.C.

They try to keep track of U.S. missile and space launchings at Cape Kennedy, Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., and Kwajalein Island, where tests are being made for an antiballistic missile defense system.

They show up regularly for U.S. naval maneuvers and are likely to be spotted offshore when there is any unusual activity at a U.S. Navy base.

Although Navy officials decline to discuss the operations of either Soviet or U.S. snooper ships, it is reasonable to assume that U.S. ships try to keep a similar electronic watch on the Russians. The Liberty, according

to a Pentagon statement at the time of the attack, left Rota on June 2 and had just arrived at her station about 15 miles off shore on June 8 when she was hit by Israeli jets and, a

short time later, by one of three torpedoes fired by Israeli torpedo boats.

Almost Couldn't Communicate

Ironically, this ship, with all her complicated communications gear, lost almost all her ability to communicate in the first attack by the fighters. Her skipper was able to get off a brief, uncoded voice report to the 6th Fleet, reporting that she was under attack.

A report aboard the carrier USS Essex and bomber hurriedly reached and thought World War II had ended.

the fleet, it is now known, feared much the same thing. They didn't know, until the apology came from Tel Aviv, who had attacked the Liberty.

The Liberty arrived at Valletta, Malta, two days after the attack and a Navy court of inquiry was convened under Rear Adm. Isaac C. Kidd to inquire into all aspects of the attack.

The inquiry was completed early last week and Kidd brought the report to the Pentagon where it is now being studied. It is expected to be released early this week.